Chapter One

Alfie

“A phone call just came in. There’s a man on hold for you.”

“Alright. Who is it, then?” I ask.

“That’s the thing, mate. It’s Porter Douglas.”

“Patch him through, and give me the room,” he said quietly. There a things a man has to do alone.

“Are you sure?” Ifan says as he hesitates in the doorway.

My chest heaves and my breath quickens. The blood in my veins feels more like lava as heat rises up inside me. Porter Douglas has been back in my life for less than a minute, and Ifan is already treating me like I’m going to have a breakdown. “Do I need to tell you twice?”

Ifan slips out of the room, and my phone lights up.

I’ve thought of this moment for years. What I’d say if I ever got the chance. Now I’m struck mute and dumb as my mind goes blank. I grip the phone so hard the plastic protests with a creak. Hours in the gym have made me a formidable man. I have to keep in shape and stay one step ahead of the crooks I’m after. If you showed any weakness in this business, they’ll exploit it, and hollow you out like a pumpkin.

I bow my head and take a few deep breaths, steadying my nerves as I regain my composure. The man in control was the one who holds power. I’ve proved myself and built my own empire. I’m worthy of the same respect Porter demands. The thought cools my blood lust. *In the end, Porter conceded to me.* Amused by the thought, I pick up the receiver.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t hang up this phone on you old man.”

“Athena needs you.”

The name is a sledgehammer to the sternum. Images of large milk chocolate colored eyes fringed with dark lashes, shimmering with tears, and filled with pain flickered in my mind.

“You don’t even deserve to speak her name to me.”

“Perhaps not. But you’re listening to me now, aren’t you?”

*Shrewd.* “Speak.”

“My time is over. A man can only hold the top position for so long. I accepted this when I began. My number’s finally getting called in, and I choose to go down with the ship. She can’t be here when that happens. I know the drill. They’ll come in, clean house and convert the ones they think will be loyal. The sheep. I can’t take my last breathe knowing my daughter’s about to be another man’s slave. She’d be nothing more than a toy to be ridiculed and abused. We both know she deserves better.”

“She always has,” I spat. I’m not moved by the old man’s sudden change of heart. This is his swan song. He means to assuage his guilt before he leaves this world. It’d take a hell of a lot more than this last ditch effort to keep her safe to do that. He treated her more like a possession than a child.

“Yes. You’re right.”

“Look I’m not buying what you’re trying to sell here—

“I can see all the mistakes I’ve made now. Don’t make her suffer for what I did.”

“Uh huh. You’re telling me this looking for what mate? Forgiveness?” I snort. “I’ve none to give you.”

“I didn’t expect you to. This is about Athena.”

“And you think she’ll leave everything she’s built behind, why? We both know she’s stubborn as a mule.”

“I’m not giving her a choice. I’ll send the information that tells you when and where she’ll arrive and how she can retrieve her money. Make sure you’re ready for that. She can’t ever come back, Bowring. If she does, she’ll be a pawn. A symbol of the old god that fell. They’ll break her and parade her living carcass around.”

I don’t respond. He’s right about this. “What do you want me to do? Hold her prisoner? Make a new cage for her to live in?”

“No, create her a new life so good she won’t miss the old one.”

“This is a mess you made. You leave it at my feet and expect me to clean it up?” I snarl.

“Was your love for Athena so fleeting?”

The words piss me off further. “You don’t get to feign concern now. Too little too late.”

He continues, ignoring my barbs. The move drive home the seriousness of the situation. He always had to have the last word and prove his dick was bigger. This isn’t a ruse or paranoia. *Athena is in real danger.* “Do you understand what it means if you agree to this. She’ll be your responsibility going forward. Yours to care for.”

“Ya know I won’t deny her this.”

He chuckles. “I did. I’ll be in touch.”